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Istook and Garrett Agree On Making the Future Happen Now in Oklahoma

Oklahoma City, OK. - Congressman Ernest Istook (R-OK) and Oklahoma State School Superintendent Sandy Garrett (D) agree that Oklahoma can take the national lead in bringing handheld computer technology to high school students . They say they're working together to make it happen--and to happen right away.

“Soon every school will have this technology, but those who jump in first will enjoy the most benefits,” said Istook. **“I believe Oklahoma can lead the way. It's the quickest and least expensive way to put computer technology in the hands of every single student, so they are using it every day during and out of school, and not just occasionally in a computer lab.”**

Last week, Istook led a group of Oklahoma education leaders, including Garrett, to study how handheld computers were being used in an IL school district where 1,700 students and 65 teachers each use a Palm III personal digital assistant (PDA) for their daily schoolwork.

National use of handheld computers is exploding, and they are projected to outsell desktop computers this year. Handhelds fit in the palm of your hand, yet are far cheaper than either desktop or laptop computers. They also are growing dramatically more powerful even as their prices are dropping. The Illinois district acquired them for just over \$200 each, and some prices now are even lower.

“I am very impressed with the capability of these handheld devices with application to learning,” said Garrett. **“Congressman Istook and I observed students using their handheld computers to gather and analyze a wide variety of data and then sharing this information with the instructor and other students in the class. It was truly exciting to see such powerful and inexpensive computing tools being used to such great effect by both students and teachers. If used appropriately, these devices could prove to be very effective instructional tools.”**

School officials at District 230 in Orland Park, IL shared with the Oklahomans how student enthusiasm and test scores had both increased even among "at-risk" students since the implementation of the program last fall . The district jumped into their use on a "leap of faith" with only 5 months between making the decision and putting the computers in students' hands. Many teachers learned right alongside their students, with students often helping the teachers, and combining to find new ways to use them in every course. Many classes rarely exchange papers between students and teachers now, since each handheld has a built-in infrared beamer they use to send assignments back and forth. A growing number of textbook publishers are moving toward ebooks; future students could have all their textbooks, assignments, schedules and everything on a unit that fits in the palm of their hand rather than in a backpack and a storage locker. (Handhelds are backed up to regular desktop computers to assure that no information is lost.)

“We need our kids to have the computer skills they will need in today's world. There is an enormous difference between sharing a desktop computer for one class period and having access to a handheld computer 24 hours a day. The program is successful because it uses something kids are already using and enjoy,” said Istook.

“We want to find the way to make this happen on a grand scale in Oklahoma , and to do it immediately--even by this fall--finding the state, local, federal and private funding. It costs far less than so many school computer programs, yet has enormous advantages. One extra advantage is that high-tech businesses will see Oklahoma taking the lead in an exciting innovation; this may help attract some of them to locate here.”